



Crisis Response in K-12 Study Abroad

A Guide for Conducting Tabletop Exercises



Introduction

The National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) and United Educators (UE) recently conducted a survey to assess how independent schools are managing the risks posed by **study abroad programs**. The survey showed that only 52 percent of schools have a **crisis management plan** for each study abroad program.

Administrators overseeing global studies programs for independent schools agree that crisis response planning should occur before every trip. It is vital that all travelers and administrators understand their roles and what may be needed in the event of a crisis. UE created this tabletop exercise guide to facilitate emergency and crisis planning instruction for administrators, global studies directors, and trip leaders. We have included scenarios based on three of the most common independent school study abroad claims reported to UE.

Study abroad program

Throughout these efforts and in this advisory, “**study abroad programs**” refers to any school-sponsored educational program offered to students involving travel to a foreign country for up to one academic year, including programs delivered at foreign institutions or ad hoc, as well as short-term trips led by school faculty, and experiential and service learning trips.

Crisis management plan

To address the many issues that arise during a crisis, UE recommends that schools create a **crisis management plan**—a systematic model for use by a predetermined crisis response team to direct decisions during a crisis.

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How to Use This Guide

These scenarios should prompt crisis response and study abroad team members to discuss your school’s policies and practices, apply them to the facts, and consider whether the exercises reveal any deficiencies in your crisis response protocol. As with any tabletop exercise, there are no right or wrong answers.

In addition, the UE video “How to Conduct a Tabletop Exercise at Your Institution: A Tutorial for Campus Administrators and Crisis Response Team Members” provides guidance structuring a tabletop exercise, regardless of the scenario selected, and can be especially helpful to institutions that lack previous experience with these exercises.

Selecting a Facilitator, Participants, and Observers

FACILITATOR. The facilitator is responsible for setting the ground rules and tone, leading and moderating the discussion, helping to answer participant questions, and resolving problems. When selecting a facilitator, look for someone who is well organized, knowledgeable about the exercise topic, and has good interpersonal skills.

PARTICIPANTS. Invite people or departments that are likely to respond to or be heavily influenced by the scenario. As mentioned, this should include members of the crisis response team, the global studies director, and trip leaders.

OBSERVER. To ensure participant feedback is accurately and completely recorded, require one or more people to observe the exercise, take notes, and recount observations during the review process. Observers should not participate in the scenario’s discussion, but should provide input during the debriefing.

Facilitators’ Role

The facilitator should always introduce the exercise by reading the objectives. Only the objectives and facts of the scenario, including injects, should be provided to participants. The items under “Questions and Issues to Consider” are for the facilitator only and can be used in several ways. If the group’s discussion is lagging, the facilitator might use them to help prompt conversation and keep things on track. By contrast, if the group is active, the facilitator may want to reserve some or all of the items for possible discussion in the debriefing and evaluation at the end of the exercise.

The facilitator should encourage participants and observers to note any gaps identified in the plan and procedures, as well as further training needs. These would be discussed during the debriefing and evaluation, in which participants and observers share their thoughts on the exercise’s discussions. Some schools ask participants to complete written evaluations after the exercise.

Participants or Audience

The participants—or audience—for each tabletop exercise should reflect your school’s organization and oversight of study abroad programs. UE recommends that all members of your crisis response team participate in the exercise. Additional participants include the global studies director, or the person who oversees your study abroad program, and trip leaders.

Scenario One: Student Alleges Sexual Assault

Objectives

- Respond to the study abroad scenario based on our crisis response protocol and sexual harassment policies.
- Identify gaps within our crisis response plan that make it less than effective in responding to the scenario.
- Identify sexual harassment training needs for campus constituents based on this scenario.

Opening

Your school sponsors a two-week program in Spain. The current group of 16 students and two trip leaders (one male and one female, both faculty members at the institution) are staying with eight host families in Madrid. Your school's policies state that only students and faculty of the same gender are to stay with the same host family.

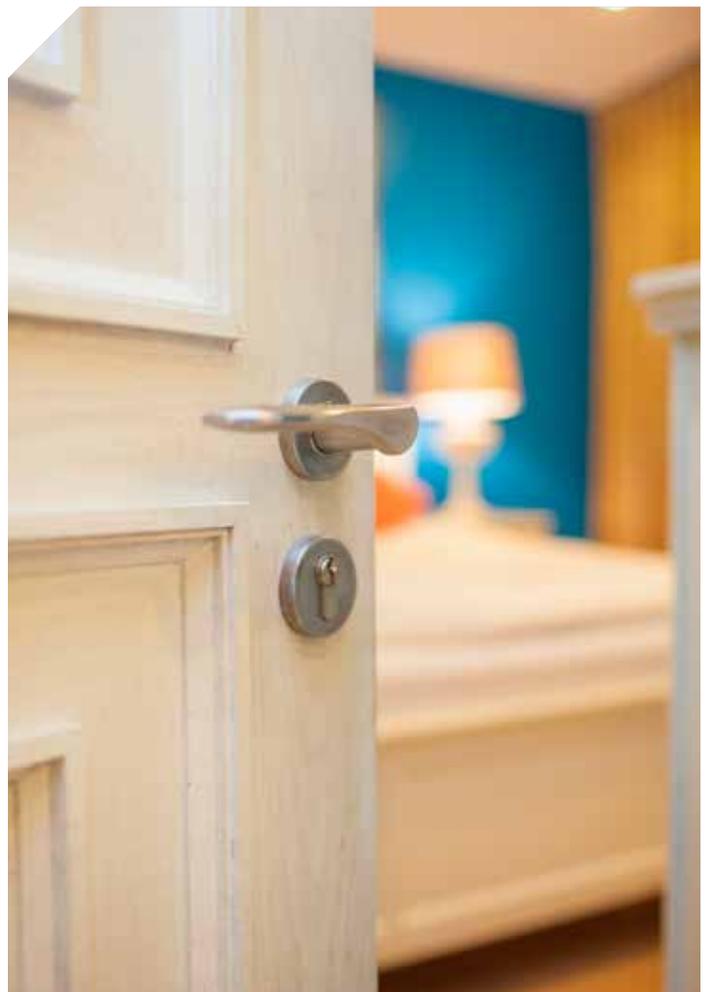
Chloe, age 16, approaches the faculty leaders to report that the father of her host family has entered her room the last two nights. He sits at the edge of her bed and attempts to converse with her. He offered to give Chloe a massage, but she asked him to stop and is uncomfortable with the late night visits. After speaking with Chloe, the trip leaders notify the global studies director back home.

Group Discussion

Based on what you know, discuss appropriate responses and activities your crisis response team, global studies director, and trip leaders should take.

Questions and issues to consider include:

- If yes, what does it say about appropriate and inappropriate interactions with students?
- Do we have a host family vetting process?
- If yes, does it include background checks?
- Who on the crisis response team is responsible for ensuring that the trip leaders know what to do in this situation? Can this individual also ensure trip leaders' understanding of other relevant school policies, such as those prohibiting sexual harassment and assault?
- Should parents be notified of this incident?



Inject One

Chloe is moved to a different host family. Because of space constraints, Chloe is now staying with a host family that is housing two male students from your institution, Geoff and Saul, both age 17. The trip leaders do not report the mixed gender housing arrangement to anyone back at school.

The next morning Chloe arrives at check-in visibly upset. She says all three students went out late last night and visited a discotheque. She remembers the two male students giving her several drinks. She is bleeding and very sore, and tells the trip leader she thinks Geoff forced her to have sex.

Group Discussion

Based on what you know, discuss appropriate responses and activities your team should take.

Questions and issues to consider include:

- How does the crisis response plan address student sexual assault during a study abroad program?
- What are the proper protocols for reporting the assault to the school, the victim's parents, and local authorities?
- Who investigates the assault on behalf of your institution? Does this individual have the proper training and experience to investigate a sexual assault involving students or employees?
- What types of remedial measures are offered to the victim, such as counseling or separating the victim from the alleged perpetrator?
- Do trip leaders have contact information for a representative of the crisis response team and other appropriate officials?
- How do your state's mandatory reporting laws, which generally cover sex or other child abuse allegations, apply in this situation?

Inject Two

Geoff and Saul admit to visiting a discotheque and drinking with Chloe, but they deny harassing or assaulting her in any way. In fact, Geoff and Saul claim that Chloe left the discotheque without them early in the evening. Geoff vehemently denies any violent behavior and tells the trip leaders he will email his parents to let them know he is being falsely accused.

- How are the rights of the alleged perpetrator and victim preserved during the investigation and adjudication of the assault?
- What happens if either the alleged perpetrator or victim must be sent home early? Are there enough trip leaders to accompany one or both of the students home?



Scenario Two: Students Attend Side Trip to Ocean

Objectives

- Practice our crisis response plan for an unplanned side trip during a study abroad program.
- Determine the effectiveness of our vetting process for third-party providers, including those that provide trip leaders and transportation companies.
- Determine our school's ability to provide timely and accurate information to different audiences.

Opening

After obtaining permission from the school, the Mandarin teacher advertises a trip to China that is partially operated by a private company. The students and two trip leaders (one is the faculty member who advertised the trip; the other is a wilderness exploration leader employed by the private company) plan to stop in Zhuhai, a city on the coast known as the Chinese Riviera. Your institution's policies state that only preapproved activities and trips are to be conducted during the study abroad program.

After arriving in Zhuhai, the wilderness exploration leader offers to take the students and trip leaders to a secret beach he knows about nearby. To get there, they must arrange for bus transportation with his friend's company in town. The bus is involved in a minor collision on the way to the beach. No one is injured, but the party is stranded in a small coastal town overnight while the bus undergoes repairs. The faculty trip leader emails the global studies director to inform the school of a change in the itinerary and the bus accident.



Group Discussion

Based on what you know, discuss appropriate responses and activities your crisis response team, global studies director, and trip leaders should take.

Questions and issues to consider include:

- Would this incident activate the institution's crisis response plan?
- What do our contracts with third parties say about extracurricular activities during the program?
- What do our contracts with third parties say about vetting transportation providers?



Inject One

Repairs to the bus have not been completed. Stuck in the small coastal town another day, both trip leaders agree to take the students to the beach. The wilderness exploration leader takes the group to the water and stays on shore to monitor the swimmers. After an hour, the group realizes that Zachary, age 18, is missing. After several hours there is still no sign of Zachary. The other students begin texting, emailing, and calling their friends and parents back home to share the news of Zachary's disappearance.



Group Discussion

Based on what you know, discuss appropriate responses and activities your team should take.

Questions and issues to consider include:

- What are the proper protocols for reporting the missing student to the school, the victim's parents, and local authorities?
- What does our crisis response plan say about whom to contact first at the school in the event of an emergency?
- Do we have a plan for quickly communicating with relevant staff about developing study abroad issues? What about a similar plan for communicating with parents?

Inject Two

Zachary's mother finds out about his disappearance after seeing a Facebook post. She calls the school immediately and demands answers. She says that Zachary did not know how to swim. The waiver and release signed by Zachary's mother before the program was attached to an itinerary, but there was no mention of a possible side trip to the ocean for swimming. Zachary's parents are divorced, and Zachary's father did not sign the waiver and release. He calls the school and threatens to sue. Zachary did not sign any form of risk transfer document before his departure.



Group Discussion

Based on what you know, discuss appropriate responses and activities your team should take.

Questions and issues to consider include:

- What does our crisis response plan say about designating a person to remain in touch with Zachary's parents and offer the school's continuing support?
- What resources are available to us to find a missing person?
- Does our study abroad insurance provide repatriation for the student's body if necessary?
- Does our study abroad insurance provide emergency airfare for Zachary's parents?



Scenario Three: Student Health Emergency

Objectives

- Determine the effectiveness of institution plans, policies, and procedures for responding to mental health emergencies.
- Evaluate the adequacy of resources, such as nearby health care facilities, counseling centers, and other materials to support a health care crisis response.
- Identify mental health training needed for study abroad program leaders and resources for study abroad participants based on this scenario.
- Determine if our school's student to trip leader ratio is adequate.

Opening

Your school organizes an Alternative Spring Break trip to Costa Rica. Twenty students and two faculty members (who are fluent in Spanish) travel to a remote jungle and build health clinics for residents with no access to medical care. The trip is popular, and the 20 students are selected competitively. On the second day in Costa Rica, Ava, age 15, tells one of the trip leaders that she forgot to bring her antidepressant medication. The trip leaders phone the school and learn that Ava's student health files do not contain a prescription for the antidepressant.

Group Discussion

Based on what you know, discuss appropriate responses and activities your team should take.

Questions and issues to consider include:

- Would this incident activate the institution's crisis response plan?
- Does our pretrip medical form request participants to list relevant health issues, allergies, and medications?
- Does our prescription medication policy address self-administration of medications on study abroad programs?

Inject One

The school calls Ava's parents. They tell the global studies director that she has been seeing a psychiatrist and was recently diagnosed with anorexia nervosa. The school decides that Ava must be sent home early.

Group Discussion

Based on what you know, discuss appropriate responses and activities your team should take.

Questions and issues to consider include:

- Are there enough trip leaders in attendance to send one home early with Ava?
- How are the remaining students supervised in the event one trip leader must bring a student home early?
- Who is responsible for the costs of flying students and trip leaders home early?



Inject Two

Before Ava is flown home, the trip leaders find her in the bathroom bleeding from her arms with several self-inflicted cutting wounds. She is in need of immediate medical attention.



Group Discussion

Based on what you know, discuss appropriate responses and activities your team should take.

Questions and issues to consider include:

- Who administers first aid care in the event of a student injury?
- Do trip leaders know what nearby resources are available, including health care centers, mental health providers, or the U.S. embassy?
- What types of counseling and accommodations should be offered to the participant now and on her return?
- How should the family be notified of the situation?

Acknowledgment

This guide was written by Joe Vossen, JD, associate risk management counsel for UE.



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